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ABSTRACT

During writing conferences, many teachers impose their own ideas and attitudes on the student's essay, and often are not sure how else to help their students arrive at changes that will improve their writing. Understanding or assessment of a student's prior knowledge about the topic can be very helpful to a teacher in shaping the conference and paper under discussion. Brainstorming is a powerful prewriting activity that helps students draw upon previous experience to discover what might be relevant about their writing topic. Students who know little about a topic need a special kind of conference that focuses directly on building the ideas or concepts being written about and provides suggestions for sources of further information or alternative topics. When students do know something about a topic but have not thought it through, the first draft often serves as a way to develop ideas. In this case, a productive conference might focus on what the student knows about the topic and how aspects of that knowledge are related to each other. A conference focusing on the linguistic or organizational aspects of a paper can be helpful for students who know a good deal about a topic and have thought it through already. (HTH)

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WHAT STUDENTS KNOW AND WHAT THEY WRITE:

WAYS TO FOCUS A WRITING CONFERENCE

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Sometimes writing conferences pose problems for teachers. Sometimes it's hard to know what to say, and sometimes it's extremely difficult for the student to get the "message." Many conferences end up with the teacher doing the talking and the showing (and even the thinking) while the student tries to understand what the teacher is talking about, how that relates to what has been written, and what needs to be changed to comply with the teacher's suggestions. Helpful response to student writing is sufficiently difficult that a number of researchers and writing educators are beginning to spend more time attempting to understand the process to make it a more successful instructional activity. In the June issue of the Network Newsletter, Nancy Sommers examined ways in which teachers unwittingly "appropriate" their students' essays and impose their own ideas and attitudes on them. While this can be inhibiting and perplexing for the student, often teachers aren't sure how else to help their students arrive at changes which will improve their writing.

Because conferencing is an issue with many facets, this paper will focus on only one kind of writing conference -- that which takes place when the student is engaged in some form of informational writing. It will examine

ways in which personal knowledge about a topic affects the language, organizational structure, and coherence used by particular writers.

Writing-across-the-curriculum as an approach to learning suggests that activities in writing cannot be isolated from the subject matter itself. The experience of writing is a function of the purpose, personal commitment, and of all the information that a writer has stored in memory which is potentially available for use in a writing experience. As teachers of writing we know that knowledge about a topic is critical to the manner in which a paper is written. When we've been asked to write, we've often dreaded the "ordeal." We've engaged in a particular kind of struggle when the topic of our paper was one with which we weren't too familiar, or one which we hadn't had time to really think through. I'd like to suggest that the entire idea of memory (what is known, the sophistication of that knowledge, how that knowledge is organized in memory, and how accessible it is to the individual) directly affects any composition -- why it works or why it doesn't. Because such knowledge so directly helps shape the paper, our understanding or assessment of what a student knows about a topic can be very helpful to a teacher during a conference. It will shape the conference and eventually shape the paper as well.

To get a better view of how memory operates, let's look at such activities as brainstorming or free association. As teachers of writing we know that brainstorming is a powerful pre-writing activity because it helps

students draw upon previous experience to discover what might be relevant about their writing topic. The strength of brainstorming is that it permits each writer to search his or her own memory for personal knowledge to use in the writing task. Those of us who have participated in or conducted a brainstorming activity know that sometimes nothing comes to mind -- and when something finally does it may seem tangential to the stated topic. At other times many ideas come to mind and these seem to lead us along a path of richly related ideas. Most often however, we find ourselves at paths in-between.

People who know little about a topic generally provide very tangential responses to brainstorming or free association probes. On the other hand, when they know a good deal about a topic their responses are generally coherent, well organized, and at a high level of conceptualization.

If we examine student papers we can readily see that when students write to a topic about which they know a good deal, the language, organization, and coherence of their work is likely to be good; conversely, when students know little about a topic their language, organization, and coherence is likely to seem tight, restricted, and contrived, or to fall apart altogether. When students have little knowledge or are unwilling to risk stating the ideas they do have, they may voice gross generalities or abstractions without examples or enriching illustrations. At other times their writing is fragmented; they often write their associations, examples, and descriptions in the form of lists with few explicit connections among their ideas.

Students who know little about a topic need a special kind of conference time, one focussing directly on building ideas or concepts being written about. Such students may need conference time which is primarily concerned with the presentation and development of new information. In the course of this conference it may become apparent that a student knows so little that simply amplifying the topic will inevitably prove futile. In such cases the teacher may need to provide suggestions for sources of further information to be consulted before even attempting to revise the writing. Sources might include direct instruction, another student, a film, or the library. (In some cases it may even be more productive to suggest an alternative topic.)

When students do know something about a topic but haven't thought it through thoroughly, the first draft often serves as a way to develop ideas. They seem to know some of the attributes, can cite examples associated with the topic, but are not sure if or how the parts fit together. In this case, a productive conference might focus on what the student knows about the topic, and how aspects of that knowledge are related to each other. The teacher's role in this type of conference is to help the student think through the major topic, identify some interweaving details, and imagine how all the pieces "fit." While this type of conference deals with topic-related knowledge, the student can also be helped to begin refining that knowledge with the specific writing task in mind. Since the first draft in this case is a productive step in becoming aware of available knowledge and relationships, it is important that self reflection about

the insights gained from the conferencing experience be used as the next step in refining the paper. When topic-related knowledge is the focus of the conference, often the language, content, and structure of the paper will improve together on later drafts.

With students who know a good deal about a topic and have thought it through already, a conference focussing on the linguistic or organizational aspects of the paper can be helpful. Their knowledge will usually lead them to make good use of examples and associations in their writing, providing the elaboration and embellishments necessary to make a paper work well. For them the conference can focus on teacher and student judgments about how the details might best be organized, which words or phrases might be changed for specificity and impact, and what might be changed to help it cohere more strongly.

A consideration of how thoroughly the writer has thought through the material can help both the student and the teacher focus the conference on one particular aspect of the paper -- either the topic or the manner of presentation. It helps students think about what they know, what they think is important to write about, and how they think things are related. It also encourages them to give examples and descriptions of what they mean to say. Such considerations can change the conference from teacher "telling" to student "showing." Similarly, the teacher's role changes from "teller" to "concerned other" who helps the student reflect on, expand, and evaluate what is known and how to write about it.

This type of conference can be particularly freeing for both teachers and students. With teacher as "teller" students are often uneasy. When engaged in informational writing they often hold back information. They hesitate to give examples or share their associations when they aren't absolutely certain whether or where things fit--when they're still thinking things through. Unfortunately, these are the kinds of ideas that need to be explored. They have the potential to provide clarity for the writer and can help the paper become more interesting, more alive.

The distinction between topic and presentation is hardly new. However, many teachers consider presentation at the punctuation and sentence level alone...and save these for the editing stage. Others try to do it all at once--to deal with topic and presentation as separate issues in the same conference. What I have been suggesting is qualitatively different. The level of a student's topical knowledge directly affects the language, content, and structure of the written composition. Conferences can take at least three different paths depending on how much a student knows about a topic, how well it is organized, and how accessible that knowledge is for the student to use. When a student knows very little about the topic, the teacher should focus on providing some new information. If this fails to help the student make "sense" of the topic, additional data-gathering or a new topic may be necessary. If a student has some knowledge about a topic but the information is either incomplete or "muddy," the discussion needs to focus on development and organization of ideas. When the student is knowledgeable about a topic and has thought through major relationships, the conference can then focus on the manner in which those ideas are presented... on the "surface" features of the paper.

If conferences are approached with these distinctions in mind, the teacher may have a clearer understanding of where to focus the student's attention, and the student may emerge with a clearer idea of what to do next.